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C O N F I D E N T I A L CASABLANCA 000210

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STATE FOR NEA/MAG

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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [KISL](#) [KOCI](#) [KWMN](#) [PREL](#) [MO](#)
SUBJECT: MOROCCAN EFFORTS TO COUNTER ISLAMIC EXTREMISM: THE
MAGHRAWI AFFAIR

Classified By: CLASSIFIED BY: CG ELISABETH MILLARD FOR REASONS 1.4 (B)
AND (D).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: A controversial fatwa, or religious opinion, by a Gulf-sponsored Imam was the trigger, or perhaps excuse, for the Government of Morocco (GOM) to crack down on independent, fundamentalist Islamic institutions. In late September a well-known Moroccan salafist, Sheikh Mohammed Al Maghrawi, issued a fatwa endorsing the marriage of girls as young as nine years of age. Maghrawi operated a large network of schools, apparently with major funding from the Gulf. The media and civil society were quick to denounce what they called the legalization of pedophilia.⁸ The government likewise condemned the ruling and opened legal proceedings against the sheikh. It closed down his network of Islamic schools along with some other unlicensed schools around the country. As part of its broader counter extremist effort, the GOM announced major reforms to the religious establishment to bring it under greater state/royal control, in an effort to counteract radical and particularly Saudi-supported salafist teachings.
END SUMMARY.

The Maghrawi Affair

¶2. (U) In late September, Sheikh Mohammed Ben Abderrahman Al Maghrawi, well-known for his salafist leanings and Saudi-supported Koranic schools, issued a fatwa on his website declaring that girls as young as nine years old can marry and carry out wifely duties. Maghrawi based his fatwa on the fact that the Prophet Mohammed married his second wife

Aisha at that age (although when he consummated this marriage remains a subject of controversial debate). The media, children's and women's organizations, and the government roundly criticized the fatwa as legalizing pedophilia. The High Council of Ulema, which is presided over by King Mohammed VI, rejected the fatwa and labeled the sheikh an "agitator" and the fatwa, "absurd and abominable." A public prosecutor in Casablanca opened a judicial investigation of the incident with the aim of bringing criminal charges against Maghrawi. According to reforms enacted in 2004 to the Moudawana or family status laws, the legal age of marriage is eighteen years and all underage marriages must be approved by a judge.

¶3. (U) As widespread condemnation continued, the government

closed around twenty Koranic schools in the Marrakech region operated by Maghrawi and announced that his website would also be blocked. Maghrawi, who absconded to Mecca, responded in an interview on Al Jazeera that his opinion is shared by many of the Ulema around the world and until this incident he was welcomed to participate in conferences organized by the High Council of Ulema.

¶8. (SBU) Mohammed Daarif, an academic expert on Islamic movements in Morocco, told poloff that he believes that in addition to the crack down in the wake of the 2003 bombings in Casablanca, the Palace's reaction to Maghrawi's fatwa represents the second significant step by the government to root out salafist influences. He claimed the government was waiting for an opportunity to move against the Saudi-backed salafist movement and seized on the fatwa as a way to send a clear message that extremists will no longer be tolerated. "There is no doubt that the Saudis will have to respond in some fashion," said Daarif. In addition, the largest circulation independent daily, Al Missae, agreed with Daarif's assessment and opined in a recent article on royal religious reforms that, "It (the palace) has declared war on Wahhabi salafia by means of sharp, unprecedented statements against Al Maghrawi."

Religious Reforms:

¶9. (SBU) Within weeks of the Maghrawi affair two other events occurred which also demonstrated the resolve of Palace to stamp out unofficial and salafist activities. First, the Moroccan newspaper Al Ahdath Al Maghribiya reported that

Imams in Fes reacted angrily to the government's closure of several recently refurbished mosques and Koranic schools which are allegedly affiliated with the banned Islamist Justice and Charity Organization (JCO), a Sufi-based fundamentalist group, which does not recognize the King's title as "Commander of the Faithful."

¶10. (U) Second, the King announced sweeping reforms in the religious sector that aim to decentralize religious authority by creating local Ulema councils with greater supervision over regional affairs and a Council of the Ulema for the Moroccan Community in Europe. According to the semi-official Moroccan news service, the reform will cost 20 million dirham (USD \$2.3 million), and includes the training of 33,000 Imams, the creation of 70 regional councils, and the "rehabilitation of 3,180 mosques to propagate a culture of religious tolerance and confront extremism." Contacts and media sources agree that ultimately the aim of these reforms is to tighten the government's control over Islamic scholars their teachings.

¶11. (SBU) Maghrawi went off to Saudi Arabia, allegedly on a "small pilgrimage." From there he indicated he never intended to promote pedophilia nor undermine the system in Morocco. As far as we know he has not returned and is unlikely to do so without a clear signal he would not be arrested.

12 (C) COMMENT: The speed and severity with which the government reacted to Maghrawi's fatwa lends credence to the argument that the GOM was waiting for an excuse to send a message to Islamic leaders operating on the periphery of the state-sanctioned structure. Al-Maghrawi's "misstep" provided the King an opening to remove an influential advocate of Saudi-sponsored fundamentalist Islam. Together, the GOM's actions further underscore the King's role as "Commander of the Faithful" and bolster the government's counter-radicalization efforts.

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